Sibbert (R. L.)

AN ADDRESS

READ AT THE FIRST MEETING

OF THE

AMERICAN

ACADEMY OF MEDICINE.

BY THE SECRETARY,

R. LOWRY SIBBET, A. B., M. D.,

IN PHILADELPHIA, SEPTEMBER 6, 1876,

ON THE

NECESSITY OF AN ORGANIZATION WHICH SHALL ENCOURAGE A HIGHER STANDARD OF QUALIFICATIONS IN THE MEDICAL PROFESSION IN THE UNITED STATES.

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ADDRESS.

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Medical Profession:—We have assembled to-day under circumstances of unusual interest and responsiblity. As a nation we have reached our first Centennial. Starting with three millions of people we have become forty-five millions, and are multiplying at a prodigious rate. In addition to the natural increase at home, Europe, Asia, Africa and the Islands of the sea are pouring in upon us their surplus populations. With a vast territory yet unoccupied, except by the Indian, a rich and varied soil and moderate climate, mineral resources of untold value, a Republican for of government and free institutions, we are rapidly assuming the first place among the nations.

Taking a retrospect of the past century, we see much that has been done by our people. In agriculture, in manufactures, in commerce, in literature, in science and in art,—in all that contributes to national prosperity and growth, we have become distinguished. In the achievement of these results, all classes of our people have taken an active part—the statesman, the scholar, the merchant, the artist, the farmer, the mechanic,—and when necessary, the soldier—all have labored together, and all enjoy the blessings of their industry, their patriotism and their toil.

But looking forward into the future—into the century upon which we have just entered, we see much more that is yet to be done. In a brief space of time, perhaps within the space allotted to some of us, our people will have actual possession of our broad country, extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Over the grave of the Autochthon of North America, the plowshare will soon pass, and in the whirl of business he will be forgotten. In every territory, as well as in every State of our Union, there are evidences of rapid development As the forest is subdued and the earth yields her rich treasures, the inventive genius of our people is stimulated; the channels of trade multiply; the avenues of thought expand. Our geographical position gives us importance. With Europe on the one hand and Asia on the other, who can tell what we shall be in the near future? Including the possessions of Great Britain on the north and Mexico on the south, our population in a short time, from present indications, will

equal that of any other continent. With a civilization truly American, which under a kind Providence, we are working out for ourselves, who can place limits to our growth and achievements?

As the so-called learned professions—theology, law and medicine—have had a prominent place in society in the past, so will they in the future. Each will have a work to do, and each will have a corresponding responsibility to bear. In the order of Providence, there is committed to us the health, and in some measure the happiness and the lives of the people. Ours is a special work, and for it there is required a special fitness and preparation. All that nature has done for us is needed; all that art can contribute is required—education, refinement and skill.

Although our profession, in the trying circumstances of a new country, has accomplished a noble work, there is evidently room for improvement. The meagre attainments of many of those who enter upon the study of medicine, the ease with which they matriculate in our medical schools, and afterwards obtain the degree of Doctor of Medicine, are matters of popular criticism at home and abroad. Precisely what should be done in the premises, is a question, which requires more than a passing notice. The theologian has no familiarity with the subject; neither has the attorney-at-law. The illiterate are not in a position to make even a suggestion; and those who are professors in rival medical institutions are trammelled.

We do not propose at present to inquire what should be done by the State. Efficient legislation is certainly needed. THE AFFLICTED, THE SIMPLE-MINDED AND THE CREDULOUS SHOULD BE PROTECTED BY LAW. The States, however, are independent of each other, and claim the right to enact their own laws, and to charter institutions ad libitum. Congress cannot interfere, except to secure competent surgeons to the army and to the navy.

But what may be done by the profession? In other words, what may we do for ourselves? As already intimated, we are representatives of classical and literary institutions in which we feel a just and honorable pride. We are also alumni of medical schools, whose honors we appreciate and whose reputation we are ever ready to defend. Whatever may be affirmed of others, it cannot be said of us, that we have hastily assumed the responsibilities of professional work. We are, therefore, in a position to do what others cannot do—lead the profession, in this age of rapid development to a higher plain. We may express our sentiments; we may set an example.

It is proposed, therefore, during this Centennial year, to organize a

medical society, college, or academy,* whose active members have pursued regular courses of study in respectable institutions of learning; and as a result have obtained the usual degrees conferred by them. These degrees have long been recognized in foreign countries and in our own, as evidences of scholarship and professional fitness The first, that of Bachelor of Arts, is conferred by respectable institutions in the United States after a course of study somewhat varied, embracing languages, ancient and modern, mental and moral philosophy, rhetoric and logic, the elements of mathematics and the natural sciences, including geography, natural philosophy, chemistry, geology and astronomy. As a rule, two years of careful preparatory study, in academies or high schools, are required before entering upon the regular College course. This embraces four additional years, during which time the student passes through the freshman, the sophomore, the junior and the senior classes, under the direction of properly qualified tutors and professors. Six years of faithful study may, therefore, be taken as the average equivalent of what is required by respectable literary institutions in the United States, before graduation and the reception of the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

Three or four years after graduation the degree of Master of Arts is usually added by the same institutions on application, not, however, as a matter of honor, but of merit. It is, of course, limited to those who have taken up professional studies, or have engaged in scientific or literary pursuits. This degree is sometimes conferred upon those who have not pursued regular courses of study under the direction of preceptors or professors; in which case it is regarded simply as honorary.

The degree of Doctor of Medicine is conferred by respectable institutions upon those who have spent a variable period of time, not less however than three years, in the study of human anatomy, human physiology, pathology, chemistry, materia medica, obstetrics, the practice of medicine and surgery, and public hygiene, under the supervision of preceptors and professors. In Great Britain and Ireland, when the degree of Bachelor of Arts has not been previously obtained, examinations are instituted; and although complaints have frequently been made, their standard is far above our own. On the continent of Europe, the degree of Doctor of Medicine is conferred only upon those, who, prior to the study of medicine have pursued regular courses of study in classical schools such as we have referred to, and have taken

* These names were suggested: "National Medical Society"—"American College of Physicians and Surgeons"—"American Academy of Medicine."

degrees, or have passed frequent creditable examinations before legally constituted boards of examiners.

In our own country, we are sorry to say, no such attainments are required ; no such examinations are instituted. As far as we are able to learn, the degree of Bachelor of Arts is not required by any Medical School in the United States ; nor is any other degree of less value required It may not be generally known to the public, but it nevertheless appears to be a fact, that our best medical institutions do not require of their matriculants any definite amount of preparatory study. And by this we mean that they are not required to pass an examination, either private or public, in any of the branches of study taught in our classical or literary schools. A few lines from an interested preceptor are generally all that is required for matriculation.

Referring to a recent catalogue of Harvard University, which is making a noble effort to elevate her standard, and to institute examinations before matriculation, we find that 68 medical students out of 192 are credited with the degree of Bachelor of Arts. Referring to the catalogue of another University, we find that 10 out of 124 graduates carry with them this degree. Referring again to the catalogue of a third University, we find that only one out of a class of 36 graduates has the degree of Bachelor of Arts. And looking over the long list of medical schools of every grade and persuasion, and taking into account the fact that in some of them, at least, it is a rare thing to find a graduate of a classical or literary school, we cannot escape the conclusion, that a very large proportion of the students of these institutions—perhaps 95 per cent—go out to practice medicine without academic degrees. And taking into consideration this additional fact, that many practitioners in our Middle, Western and Southern States are not even graduates of medical schools, we are probably nearly correct when we state that not more than four per cent. of the 80,000 in the whole country are graduates of literary schools. How many of this large army of doctors in the United States are capable of contributing to the literature of the profession may not be easily ascertained ; but it is quite certain that the proportion does not exceed 15 per cent

That the medical schools of our country are largely responsible for this state of things, there can be no doubt. Having obtained their charters, for the most part, from the legislatures of the several States, they are expected to furnish competent practitioners to the people. The degree of Doctor of Medicine, which they are authorized to confer, is supposed to be an indication of professional fitness, and apparently with very good reason. The States however being sovereign, and the

Federal government having no constitutional right to interpose restraints, the faculties of many of the schools, having a pecuniary investment in them, are inclined to use the privileges of their charters for money-making purposes; and thus far, the jealousy which naturally exists, has prevented any efficient concert of action looking towards the adoption of a higher standard. In these circumstances there seems to be no help for the profession in the United States, except in voluntary associations and in example.

We have many medical societies in our country, and I believe they all have noble objects in view. Some of them have a local character and interest. They have been organized in our cities and larger towns for the advancement of medical science. But to the profession at large, they can never be of any great advantage. Our numerous county medical societies, our State societies, and our American Medical Association, present to the profession a much wider field of usefulness. In these, practical questions may be discussed, new methods of preventing and treating diseases may be considered, and by their influence in the State eleemosynary institutions may be established and sustained.

It must be conceded, however, that these associations cannot insist upon a high standard of qualifications in the profession. The State medical societies cannot rise much above the level of the county societies; nor can the American Medical Association rise much above the level of the State societies, for the reason that it is also a representative body. In none of them can we insist upon full courses of study in literary institutions, as the prerequisites of membership. To introduce a subject of this kind would certainly not be agreeable to the majority, and it would soon be dismissed. As a result we must continue to be depreciated by the profession in all European countries and even by the profession in the Canadas and in the South American States.

In a Republic such as ours, there is a disposition to allow the professions to determine for themselves the qualifications of their members. In religion, the several denominations decide what shall be the qualifications of those who minister. In law, the courts are allowed to determine who shall be admitted to practice. So also in medicine. The profession is allowed, and even expected to make use of instrumentalities outside of legislation, to secure competent practitioners for the people.

Attempts have been made again and again, to induce the legislatures of the several States to interfere, and to fix by statute the quali-

fications of those who practice medicine and surgery ; but without any very flattering results, as is well known. The argument which seems to carry with it the greatest weight, and which is generally used against legislation, is this—that as far as the people are able to discover, many of the graduates of chartered medical schools, are quite as incompetent to practice, as those who have never attended medical lectures. Hence the unwillingness of our legislators to prevent non-graduates from engaging in the practice of medicine.

Under these circumstances, there remains to us who have spent many years in preparation for professional work, but one alternative —the organization of a society whose aims and honors are the highest —a society whose portals are open to all who have the qualifications, whether at home or abroad, in the army or in the navy, in public or in private practice, or in retirement. National boundaries and ethnological differences should form no barrier to membership.

The general objects of the society to which we refer may be stated as follows, namely :

The extension of the bounds of medical science ; the elevation of the profession ; the relief of human suffering, and the prevention of disease.

The special objects of the society might be given in the following terms :

1st. To encourage young men to pursue regular courses of study in classical, scientific or literary institutions, before entering upon the study of medicine.

2nd. To bring the alumni of such institutions in the profession into closer relations with each other, and to perpetuate their names in the history of the society.

3d. To secure recognition abroad by medical associations of the highest attainments.

It is apparent that a society, college or academy whose objects and aims are such as these, should be simple in its organic structure. The constitution might provide for a president, four vice presidents, a corresponding secretary, a recording secretary and a treasurer ; and these might be elected annually. The president in concert with the vice-presidents, might appoint a judicial council, to which all applications for membership might be referred ; and to whom all questions of ethics might also be referred for final adjustment. This council might consist of seven, nine, eleven or thirteen representatives of as many classical schools ; and to secure an ever-rising standard of qualifications, these might be taken from the schools whose courses of study are the most extensive.

It is understood that other degrees might be substituted instead of Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts, when the courses of study have been equal as to time. A good moral and professional character is, of course, implied, and to these qualifications might be added three years of regular practice. Annual meetings might be held in the principal cities in our country, or as has been suggested, in the towns in which the leading classical schools are located. Attendance might be optional, except in the case of officers.

The exercises might consist of an annual address by the president, one or more prize essays, reports of committees appointed to consider special subjects, and voluntary contributions read in the order in which they are entered upon the calendar. To inspect and to arrange these might be made the work of a special committee; and the contributors might be limited to what they have seen, to what they have done, or to what they have experienced; thus imitating the Germans and other continental nations in their contributions to science.

Accepting, as we propose to do, the Code of Ethics adopted by the American Medical Association, what should be our relations with other societies in our country? To this inquiry there is but one answer—We are benefactors of our race. We should, therefore, consider it our duty to work in other associations, as heretofore, for the good of our fellow-men and our profession. Our motto might be—Independence, good will to all, hostility to none

In conclusion, allow me to refer to the importance of securing the hearty co-operation of the alumni of the leading classical schools in our country. With these institutions as the rock upon which to base our organization, there can be no doubt of success. In supporting and encouraging them we sustain our profession. Abandoning them, we bring dishonor upon ourselves and upon our profession. The Alumni catalogues of these institutions will be our guide. In them we will find the names of those who have the qualifications for membership. Rising, therefore, above the influences of locality, and giving to our association, what it is our privilege to do, a national or cosmopolitan character, we cannot fail to command the respect of the educated at home and abroad. IN HOC SIGNO VINCES.

CARLISLE, PA., SEPT. 6, 1876.

LETTER OF INVITATION.

PRINTED JUNE 17, 1876.

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.....M. D.

DEAR SIR:—You are respectfully invited to assist in the organization of a Medical Society in the United States during this Centennial year, whose ACTIVE MEMBERS shall have conferred upon them by respectable institutions the degrees represented by the abbreviations A. B., A. M. and M. D. It is understood that other degrees may be substituted instead of the first two, when the courses of study pursued have been equal as to time. A good moral character is, of course, implied; and to these qualifications may be added three years of practice.

Annual meetings may be held in the principal cities of our country, but attendance may be optional, except in the case of officers. The exercises may be brief, and limited to a certain number of addresses and prize essays. ACTIVE MEMBERS may be required to pay a small sum of money annually to defray necessary expenses.

Those who have become distinguished in the profession, without the usual academic degrees, as well as those who have received degrees of less value, may be made CORRESPONDING MEMBERS.

The special objects aimed at may be stated as follows:

1st. To encourage young men to pursue regular courses of study in classical, scientific and literary schools of the highest grade, before entering upon the study of medicine.

2d. To bring together into closer relations, the alumni of such institutions, and to perpetuate their names in the history of our profession.

3d. To secure recognition abroad, by medical societies of the highest respectability.

The general objects may be briefly stated as follows, namely:

The extension of the bounds of medical science; the elevation of professional character; and the promotion of all measures adapted to relieve the suffering, improve the health and protect the lives of the people.

To secure these objects, in harmony with our excellent Code of Medical Ethics, we propose, as a first step, to place before the young

men of our rapidly growing country, a position of honor, the highest known among men which can be reached only by patient study and graduation.

In all enlightened countries, medical societies are numerous, and in most cases (our own country being the exception) these are founded upon degrees. Conferred by chartered institutions of high grade, degrees are everywhere regarded as evidences of scholarship and professional fitness; and we may add, that they are made the prerequisites of admission into all respectable associations of the kind in Europe

It must be plain to every one who has given this subject any attention, that if, as members of American medical societies, we are ever recognized by European societies, we must command their respect; we must show by our actions, that we appreciate learning; and most of all, we must do as they do, separate ourselves from the illiterate.

We would not, however, coming out upon an independent basis, as we propose to do, undervalue the work of others; nor would we relax our efforts to advance the interests of the medical societies with which we are at present connected; but gathering up one here and there scattered over our own and other countries alumni of classical and literary schools—we would, whilst discussing the leading questions of medical science, point out the true path to honor and distinction.

To escape the prejudices of locality, it is proposed to secure the active co-operation of one representative from each of the leading classical schools in our country, whose duty it shall be to invite the eligible alumni of his school, with whom he is supposed to be acquainted, to

attend a meeting to be held in on the

day of , next, commencing at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, for permanent organization.

Signed.....

In behalf of the Alumni of.....

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